DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 085 430 UD 013 903

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| AUTHOR | Katz, William A. |
| TITLE | The Strengths of Black Families, by Robert A. Hill; A Review. Equal Opportunity Review, May 1973. |
| INSTITUTION | Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. National Center for Research and Information on Equal Educational Opportunity. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C. Div. of Equal Educational Opportunities. |
| PUB DATE | May 73 |
| NOTE | 3p. |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29 |
| DESCRIPTORS | Achievement Need; Adoption; Census Figures; Economically Disadvantaged; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Influence; *Family Resources; *Family Role; Low Income; National Surveys; *Negro Institutions; Religious Factors; Role Perception; *Sociology; Work Attitudes |

ABSTRACT

Dr. Robert B. Hill's "The Strengths of Black Families" (New York: Emerson Hall Publishers, 1972, 76pp.), which includes a preface by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., Executive Director of the Urban League, and a foreword by Andrew Billingsley, is reviewed. Dr. Hill begins by identifying five family strengths, which for blacks constitute "adaptations necessary for survival and advancement in a hostile environment." The strengths are not different from those cultivated by some white families. The first major strength of poor black families is strong kinship bonds. The second strength is a strong work orientation. The third strength is adaptability of family roles, a response to economic necessities on the part of black, low-income families. A fourth strength of the black poor is their high achievement orientation. The fifth major source of black family strength is religious orientation. In his conclusions, Dr. Hill asserts that an examination of black family strengths couldassist in understanding their weaknesses, and could thereby lead to a proper program for aiding blacks in America today. (Author/JM)

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY REVIEW

NCRIEEO The National Center for Research and Information on Equal Educational Opportunity

Teachers College, Columbia University

MAY 1973

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ED 085430

UD 013 903

# The Strengths of Black Families

**by Robert B. Hill**

Dr. Robert B. Hill's *The Strengths of Black Families* (New York: Emerson Hall Publishers, 1972, 76 pp.) is reviewed by William A. Katz, General Editor of the **Equal Opportunity Review.**

History may not always be, as Shakespeare warned, a tale told by fools, but it has often been used to confuse and fool the unwary. Sociology has also been so utilized, employing a vast array of facts, figures and tables to establish its credibility; however, its aims, hypotheses, and the very questions it sought to answer have often carried an inherent bias that infects its findings.

Much of the investigations and attendant literature on the poor and disadvantaged segments of the population has focused on their problems and pathology. Even those so called helpful efforts have tended to convince the public that the victim of poverty is himself the culprit. A popular folklore, never fully laid to rest during the Great Depression, supports this view. Stereotypes natural to a society separated along racial lines, and myths which have long aided this separation, have contributed other vital ingredients in the evolution of this type of distortion.

Lately, a great deal of literature has poured forth on the black family. Almost all have focused on its alleged weaknesses and pathologies—its matriarchal form, instability, lack of productivity—and in so doing, have taken much for granted that bears investigation. This tradition has created the impression that matriarchy, instability, and pathology are characteristic of most black families.

A new view is beginning to emerge among black social psychologists: one sees the black family struggling for survival within a complex and hostile white system, and adapting mechanisms that protect cherished values and family members.

Dr. Robert B. Hill, Research Director of the Urban League, has lodged a formidable challenge to works focusing on the pathology of poor black families. What is perhaps most interesting about his short book on the black family is its reliance on statistics issued by the U.S. Census Bureau, a source of predictably negative reports on the same subject. Dr. Hill includes other studies as well, for the Census Bureau does not ask all the questions he would like answered. He claims that what is really taking place in black, working class families is largely unknown, and in the midst of information offered on the subject the strengths of poor black families have been largely ignored.

His volume, *The Strengths of Black Families*, includes a preface by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., Executive Director of the Urban League, and a forward by Andrew Billingsley, whose *Black Families in White America* is a basic text in the field. Dr. Hill then begins by identifying five family strengths, which for blacks constitute "adaptations necessary for survival and advancement in a hostile environment." The strengths are not different from those cultivated by some white families.

The first major strength of poor black families is *strong kinship bonds.* Hill points out that these are traditionally more advanced in lower class than in middle class families, regardless of color. The Census Bureau statistics reveal that black families are far more likely than white ones to absorb younger related family members. Black families headed by women absorb an even larger percentage of children. Since formal adoption agencies have ignored blacks, informal adoption has solved this problem for the black community, and has strengthened kinship bonds. Some 7 percent of white babies and 90 percent of black ones are informally adopted. Illegitimacy, the

census statistics reveal, has been declining among black families and rising among white families, with whites registering a 4 percent gain and blacks a 10 percent loss.

The second strength of lower class black families identified by Dr. Hill is a *strong work orientation.* Three-fifths of the black poor hold jobs as compared to one half of the white poor. Three-fifths of black families are headed by women who work, though more than 60 percent of them are classified as poor, and about half receive welfare assistance. Dr. Hill further presents evidence showing that blacks want to work as much as the white poor. Interestingly enough, black families with two wage earners made less than white families with one, although black families have made some economic gains. The working wife keeps many a black family from the poverty line. Black women, despite the literature to the contrary, earn less than their husbands and are more likely than their husbands to be out of work. Indeed, more white women than black earned salaries equal to or larger than their husbands.

Even in the area of job stability, blacks record a longer employment than whites. According to some studies conducted in 1967 and 1971, some 20 percent more blacks than whites held current jobs for three years or more, and almost half of the blacks, compared to a third of whites, held their jobs for ten or more years.

The third major strength of black families is *adaptability of family roles,* a response to economic necessities on the part of black, low-income families. There is a sharing of decisions and jobs in the home, and when unanticipated separation occurs, this role flexibility tends to act as a stabilizing factor.

Dr. Hill cites several studies that dispute the theory of female dominance in two-parent black families. He concludes that most black and white families with two parents have an "equalitarian" pattern.

Though blacks have a higher proportion of families headed by women than do whites, Dr. Hill maintains this is not indicative of pathology. Contending with household problems, women develop strengths, and many do not remarry as they learn to head their families successfully. Neither is there evidence of harm to young boys brought up in fatherless homes, or of dislocations caused by the birth of children to unwed mothers. Since acceptance of black kinship ties has been strong, adjustments have been easier than sociologists have expected. Dr. Hill also finds it significant that suicide rates among whites are three times higher than that of black females and double the black male rate.

A fourth major strength of the black poor is their *high achievement orientation.* Sociologists have focused on the distance between the goals of the poor and their achievement, and thus stressed their "lack of realism." About 80% of blacks entering college today come from homes in which the father did not attend college, meaning that poor blacks are entering college in unprecedented numbers. More black than white college students tested noted that their parents wanted them to finish college (80% of blacks to 64% of whites). Black college dropout rates were lower than was estimated by researchers from the American Council on Education, another indication of the positive working of an achievement orientation.[1]

The fifth major source of black family strength is *religious orientation.* Since slavery, have utilized religion as a haven, a shield, and a source of rebellion, but above all as a survival mechanism. Dr. Hill cites the leadership offered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Leon Sullivan, and Reverend Jesse Jackson as religious figures interested in advancing the cause of the black poor.

In his conclusions Dr. Hill asserts that an examination of black family strengths could assist in understanding their weaknesses, and could thereby lead to a proper program for aiding blacks in America today. These are the major myths his study seeks to demolish:

**Most black families are matriarchal.** This is simply not so, he maintains, since "our findings reveal that most black families, whether low-income or not, are characterized by an equalitarian pattern in which neither spouse dominates."

**Black wives earn more than black husbands, thus reducing them to 'weak' family functioning.**

Not true either. "Recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicate that in 85 percent of the black families with incomes under $3,000, the husband's earnings surpassed the wife's." Thus, the husband is still "the main provider in the overwhelming majority of black families, whether low-income or not."

**More black than white babies born out of wedlock are simply given away.** The statistics forever destroy this canard, with black families much more often than white retaining custody of children born to one of their members. This is why whites often turn to adoption agencies to solve this problem. Black informal adoption, Dr. Hill finds, shows that "bonds between relatives in black families must indeed be tight and the value placed upon children very high for such a rate of adoption...to occur so regularly."

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[1] Alan E. Bayer and Robert F. Boruch, "Black and White Freshmen Entering Four-Year Colleges," *Educational Record* (American Council on Education, Washington, D.C.), Fall 1969, Table 8, pp. 371-386.

**Dependency is characteristic of black families headed by women.** The Census Bureau statistics reveal that three-fifths of the women who head black households work, and most of these have full-time jobs.

**There is widespread desertion in black families among the poor.** This has been greatly overestimated. Actually about a fifth of black families in 1969 come under the category of "deserted" in figures released on aid to deserted families in the United States.

**Low-income blacks exhibit a low interest in achievement.** The achievement orientation of lower class blacks attending college is very high, three out of every four coming from homes where the household head had no college education. Further, these black students reported their parents expected them to graduate; white students surveyed on this question provided a much lower parental expectation.

*The Strengths of Black Families* by Dr. Robert B. Hill will probably stand for some time as the first significant statistical effort to assess the adaptabilities of black families and their sources of strength. It may yet begin a trend in poverty analysis that discards charging the victim with causing (if not enjoying) his own misery.

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